

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Alan Sueda, 59, former store bookkeeper and manager, Kahului

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Alan Sueda, Japanese, was born December 20, 1920, in Waiakoa, Maui. While still an infant, he and his family moved to Alabama Camp, Puunene. When he was four years old, they moved to Kahului, where his father was an employee for Onishi Shōkai, one of the "big 5" Japanese stores which served the Paia and Puunene camps. Sueda grew up in "Onishi Camp," which housed Onishi Shōkai employees.

While attending school, Sueda held various summer jobs in the cane fields and pineapple cannery. He graduated from Maui High School in 1938 and took business courses the following year.

Beginning in 1939, Sueda took over as bookkeeper at Onishi Shōkai, replacing his father who had taken ill. Soon after, he was put in charge of store operations. In 1958, a year before Onishi Shōkai closed its doors, Sueda became an insurance agent.

Today, Sueda is an agent for Sun Life of Canada. He lives in Wailuku. When not in the office, Sueda enjoys fishing and golf.

Tape No. 7-66-1-80

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Alan Sueda (AS)

March 11, 1980

Wailuku, Maui

BY: Warren Nishimoto (WN)

WN: This is an interview with Mr. Alan Sueda. Today is March 11, 1980, and we're at his office in Wailuku, Maui.

Okay, how did you get your association with Onishi Shōkai?

AS: Well, my dad worked for Onishi Shōkai as a bookkeeper, and we lived right back of the store. Somehow, in the olden days, when your dad worked for a store, you helped in the store, too, without being paid.

WN: Did your dad pay any kind of rent to live there?

AS: At that time, they had no rent whatsoever. They had that free home. You bought food on discounted rate. They always gave you so many percent off the purchase price.

WN: How many people were living in the--I guess you call it--Onishi Camp?

AS: The Onishi Camp was separated from these homes that was right back of the store. Those that lived right back of the store was--as you say--like my family, the old Onishi man, and then the son, who was married at that time, and one of their cousins, who was married, had a family. So, we had one, two, three, four families living right back of the store.

Then, the rest of the staff lived in what we called Onishi Camp. We had--one, two, three, four, five, six--we had about six dwellings in Onishi Camp. But some of the dwellings were more like duplex type of dwelling. They had so many rooms. They may have about five, six rooms all joined together. If you are single, you live in one room there. If you're married, you might take two or three rooms. Things like that. Well, I know we had six separate dwellings right in Onishi Camp.

They had one toilet. Of course, they have few toilets in one area.

And then, they had one big wash house where everybody went there to wash their clothes. In later years, right after the war [World War II], things got a little better, and people started putting their own toilet facilities and bathroom facilities within that building. So, things got a little better during the war and after the war. But, way back, was typical cesspool, before the sewage came in. Crude living, yeah? A little better than the plantation people, though, I'd say.

But as far as I can remember, when I started looking into things, plantation people were being paid dollar a day, those days, but salesmen [order takers] here were paid either forty, forty-five, or fifty dollars a month. So, they were making a little better wages than the plantation people.

WN: Was your father a salesman?

AS: He was both a bookkeeper as well as a salesman. He had a small district that he went out to sell. I was surprised--when he passed away in 1940--the pay he was getting. Because when I took over and had to do the payroll and things, I was really surprised to see that he was making about \$110 a month. So, I can see where in my youth, I wasn't denied lot of things. When I wanted a bicycle, I was able to get it. Even going through high school, where people can afford only one pair of shoes, he'd buy me two pair instead. He said, "Don't you use one pair right throughout." You know, so that wear and tear won't be great. As I say, when I was young, I was lucky because of his position. But I'd say, for the rest of the people that was being paid anywhere from forty to fifty dollars, it was rough.

WN: Was your house any nicer or better than the other people's houses?

AS: I must say, the houses right back of the store possibly was little better. Better built. The other homes were about the same, but maybe a little cheaply made.

WN: Stores in Kahului, did most of them have their employees living in back?

AS: That's right. Yeah. Like Japanese Mercantile, they had few homes right in the back, but the majority lived elsewhere. The manager and his wife. There was another family by the name of Kawahara. The old man passed away. His son still lives, but he had nothing to do with the store. There are just a few homes. Kobayashi Store had a big dwelling right back of the store. They have two-story building and all that. They lived in that area. And Japanese Mercantile, likewise, had a place, living in the back. In fact, Kobayashi Store had right back of the store, as well as just like Onishi Camp. They were adjoining each other. They had homes there.

WN: What kind of sense of community was there among the residents of

each camp?

AS: I think was closely knit, because they were all salesmen. We didn't fight each other. We tried to live with each other. Was a really friendly competition, not like dog-eat-dog. You know, chopping prices and all that or trying to steal a good salesman from another store--things like that never happened. I thought all the salesmen really lived in harmony, because I got know all the salesmen that worked for Japanese Mercantile and Maui Shōkai. I was close friends with them, in fact. We always meet. Even today, I can talk to them, because we never bite into each other. I'd say, was a nice community. Very happy.

WN: Did you do things together? The families of people who worked in the same store?

AS: Once a year--this was before my time--they always had a company picnic. Then, they got together. Japanese Mercantile will have their company picnic, Onishi Store will have theirs.

WN: All at the same time?

AS: No, no, no. Always at a different time. I know I had some old pictures of those picnics that we attended. It was a huge occasion. It was something, when I was a youngster, I always remembered, because they had racing, and they give you a pencil. If you won the race, you win a pencil and things like that.

WN: About how many people would be at one picnic?

AS: Big picnic? I'd say, at least seventy-five people, the pictures I've seen--the group pictures that they had. That, I'm talking only Onishi Store. With all the family, the children like that, I'd say, good seventy-five people.

WN: This Mr. Onishi, what do you remember about him?

AS: He was a real fine man! A church-going man. He donated heavily to the Kahului Hongwanji there. So, I think the Kahului Hongwanji always remembered him. He was a big contributor. He was a leader in his community. Very honorable man. I have nothing but high respect for the old man.

WN: The other founders of the other four stores, did they enjoy the same type of respect?

AS: Yeah, I would say they had the same respect. In fact, they were all leaders in the community. Well, they had little different interests. But I would put this old man [Onishi] at the very top, as far as community service, and honorable. Although all of them were honorable people.

WN: Would you say that Onishi and the other four stores started in the

same manner, the same circumstances?

AS: Basically, everybody started the same circumstances because the plantation people way out in the plantation needed credit, and we gave them credit. Sometimes, we have to wait two years before we are being paid, because what we had is kompang dollar. Maybe five, six of them work in the field. After twenty-four months [eighteen to twenty-four months], they harvest the cane, and if they made money, the plantation paid them with just like a bonus. So, they used to call it kompang. I don't know why they call it kompang, but that's the expression that they used. That's when they cleared the bill out, see?

WN: But the kompang people, would they be getting something in between?

AS: Oh, yeah. They got paid daily. But the kompang [money] comes after they harvest the cane and see what kind of tonnage they got, and they deduct all the expenses. They say, "Okay, we made X number of dollars." It's just like profit sharing today. They [the plantation] say, "Okay, we'll give you 20 percent of the total net profit they made from that field." And that 20 percent may be set aside for the people that worked in that particular field for two years. It could be anywhere from a hundred dollars to a thousand dollars. But they were really at the mercy of the plantation because they don't know what kind of tonnage or what kind of expense the plantation got. They all honorable people, so you just take it with what you were given. Some fields, they got small. I know I've heard people talking, "Ho, was really small." Some people, they were happy they had the good pay. So, they really lived by the kompang in the olden days.

WN: You said that lot of these stores came up because the plantation people needed credit. Does that mean, like the plantation stores didn't give them that?

AS: Plantation stores gave credit, but I think the outside Japanese stores carried more Japanese goods than the plantation stores. Plantation stores, basically, when I came into operation, they had outlying stores right in the camp. I guess as in any sales, people buy because of the salesmen, themselves, not because of the store. That's why we had salesmen within the Okinawan group, or Fukushima-ken group. We're basically Hiroshima, so the top people were all [from] Hiroshima-ken. But we needed different ken people to hit into, because we are dealing mostly with isseis. Today, you tell what ken, shee, people don't know what ken they are [from]. But in the olden days, where you dealing with isseis, it made a hell of a lot of difference if you go to a Fukushima-ken home and you send a guy like me there. If they knew me well, fine, but if they don't know me well enough--if another store send a Fukushima-ken salesman--he's going to get all the business. And they're, I think, the most clannish group, I'd say.

WN: Fukushima?

AS: Fukushima-ken and Okinawa-ken. They were very clannish.

WN: Did you have a lot of Fukushima and Okinawan salesman?

AS: Yeah, that's why we had Chosoku Kochi [another interviewee]; we had Higa. That's two Okinawa-ken. Then, we had Fukushima-ken, some others in Fukushima-ken. During my time, we had Tomita, and Shishido, that I can remember. Fukushima-ken, you know. Because we got to have them. That's no getting away. (Chuckles)

WN: How about the other stores? Did they have . . .

AS: I think, basically, they were the same. They had lot of Fukushima-ken, because, basically, Fukushima-ken were about the most clannish group of people. So, each store had Fukushima-ken people.

WN: Were the Fukushima-ken people living in one area?

AS: No, they were scattered all over the place. Where I was born--and, actually, I spent lot of my weekends--up in Pulehu Camp. That camp was basically Fukushima-ken people. So, I got along well with them. In fact, one of the salesmen that came to work for Onishi Store came from that camp--Shishido. He's living in Honolulu. I think that whole camp had one Okinawa-ken family, and my grandparents, and their two sons that lived in the camp, and had another family that was Hiroshima-ken. The rest was all Fukushima-ken. Completely.

Keahua had lots. That's up in the country. Between Keahua and Pulehu, there was a camp called Kikania Camp. They have Fukushima-ken in there. Basically, I think, all was Fukushima-ken. Suzukis, the Abes, like that. You know, the typical Fukushima-ken surnames. They had an Old Kailua [Camp], beyond Keahua. That camp had lot of Okinawa-ken, too, as long as Fukushima-ken. So, these are the camps. It's all along the outlying district, below Omaopio, that we did business with. So, I remember that distinctly.

WN: How about the Puunene side?

AS: Yeah, Puunene side, because we did business in Camp 1, Camp 2, Camp 3, Camp 4, Camp 5. Camp 6, 7, 8, I can't recall if we had any. Camp 9, we didn't go to Camp 9, but we had Camp 10, Camp 13, that we did business with. Six, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11--I wouldn't know where 11 was. I knew where 12 was, but we did with Camp 13. [Onishi Shōkai went to Camps] 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 13.

WN: Thirteen was sort of close to Camp 5, huh?

AS: Yeah. They were in the back of Camp 5. Was a pretty big community there, way in the sticks. Between Camp 5 and Pulehu Camp, was Camp 13. Somewhere in there. More toward Kihei.

WN: The location of Onishi, who owned the land there?

AS: Basically, it's Alexander & Baldwin, but the subsidiary was Kahului Railroad Company. So, we got our lease from Kahului Railroad Company. I don't know what kind of lease rental we were paying, but in the later years, we were on the year-to-year basis, then became month-to-month, and finally in about 1955 or so, they knocked down all these areas for the new Kahului Shopping Center. So, finally, we moved to Wailuku for a few years, and then we closed down.

WN: In the beginning, did they have to pay any kind of percentage of [the store] profits toward rent?

AS: No. No, the old stores never paid percentage. We were strictly on the year-to-year lease, and later on, as I said, we were on a monthly basis. When we were on a monthly basis, we were looking for places, but it wasn't worth going into this type of operation, so we moved to a small place in Wailuku, and finally, we had to close. I say we had to close because things were too tough. You know, staying in business, competing with those cash and carry and all that, because the overhead cost is too high--taking orders, deliver, bill them, wait another month or two for the money to come in. You need too big a capital. So finally, we said it's not worth it, so we got out of business.

WN: Was there any talk about going cash and carry?

AS: We did have a cash and carry store, you know. [AS examines photograph.] You see here? J. Onishi Cash Store. The cash store was right here. This door, here.

WN: Oh, on the left side of the store.

AS: You notice this Japanese word here? This was the cash and carry store.

WN: This was way back, in 1920s?

AS: Yeah, at that time, even before the war [World War II], we had the cash and carry store, but people not accustomed to it, because mode of transportation was poor. Very few family could afford to own an automobile. So, they couldn't come out to buy [with] cash, unless the surrounding area came and buy cash. So, only success story as far as cash and carry is concerned is Ooka Supermarket [in Kahului and later, Wailuku]. It was Ooka Market. I think that man was way ahead of his time, at that time. He built a market, and he had various concessionaires within the market. You know, the meat market, the fish market, the flower shop, and things like that.

WN: But who came to shop in his store, though?

AS: All the people in Kahului Town, mostly. There were a few that came from Wailuku possibly, and from the outlying district, whenever

they could find transportation to come down. Especially on payday. Payday time, they would come down en masse and buy things cheaper, I guess.

WN: So, the people living in Kahului Town mostly went to the cash and carry, then?

AS: Yeah, because Kahului Railroad used to pay [its employees] every week. They were being paid weekly. Whereas the plantation paid once a month.

WN: You're talking about the stevedores living in Kahului?

AS: Stevedores. Yeah, yeah. They were being paid every week. And you know how they were being paid? Not by check, now. Way back, all by cash in an envelope. (Chuckles) Of course, in later years, everything came through check, but way back, even during the war years, everything was cash.

WN: Was there any advantage for someone to walk into Onishi Store and pay cash? Any kind of discount or something like that?

AS: Sure. We had cheaper prices. But let's face it, the plantation people just couldn't afford that because they didn't have loose cash in their hands. All the cash they could get a hold of was feeding, and clothing, and educating their children. So, you have to take your hat off to all these family that educated the children. Before the war, they sent their children through high school, even. That was tough. Few of them even went to college. That's even harder for these plantation people, but somehow, they did it. You've heard of tanomoshi. That was real prevalent among the plantation people--tanomoshi. They'd start a tanomoshi to help a family send a child through college, things like that.

WN: What kind of discounts were given for people who paid cash?

AS: Usually was about 5 percent cheaper, I think, was. Five percent, which seems very small at that time, but the average price Well, this going back to--because when Internal Revenue came to check us out, it wasn't during my time when I kept the books; it was during my father's time that they came to check on the books--was for 1937, 1938, 1939, 1940, 1941, the five years that they checked. You know, our average gross income was anywhere from about 16 percent to about 18 percent. So, you can see, the markup was real small in those days.

Today, the supermarkets make 15 percent on their frozen goods at specials. These are the kind of markups they getting. They use lot of loss leaders, but those days, somehow, we didn't use loss leaders. Couldn't afford to sell something below cost. But today, this is the trend, to attract people. If we had to use loss leaders and sell to our regular patrons where they charge and we can't get

the money for thirty, sixty days, we'd be out of business in no time, unless you have unlimited cash. So, it was rough, those days.

In fact, after I took over, few years later, I told my boss--this was way back in 1948 when we had the highest volume of all the years that I was there, and we didn't show much profit--so I told him, "Well, it's either you go to supermarket operation or you close the store." It wasn't worth it, because I was putting so much hours working, and you don't see the profit.

WN: Why didn't you see the profit?

AS: Gradually, the higher overhead costs, competition, you can't mark up, and the volume was small and set, because we had a lot of competition. And lot of stores, and everybody was doing the same type of business, and we couldn't raise it [prices] during the war years, because of the OPA [Office of Price Administration] control--I don't know what they call--the Office of Price Administration, I think. They had a set markup. So, unless you make a big volume with the personnel that you had, you couldn't make money. The overhead costs bite into you.

Well, anyway, the national average, those days, was 1-1/2 percent net that you make in grocery business. Of course, we were general merchandise, too, but the main volume was groceries. You know, Japanese goods and things. We had hardware, but very few that we sold. We had dry goods department, but we didn't sell that much. In fact, dry goods was a losing proposition.

So, it wasn't easy way back. Give lot of credit to these pioneers, I'd say. They made out because of long hours of work, but you can't tell the second or third generation to put more than forty hour workweek. No way you'll get that. And dedication of the salesmen. They spent lot of hours. I know when I got in, I spent lot of hours because I got the tough task of trying to make ends meet. As I said, my boss was an alcoholic, and it's tough when you have to conduct two men's business by yourself. So, I used to put in sixty, seventy-two hours a week. Every week. Sundays included. So, when these young people tell me today how hard they work, I laugh at them.

WN: When you suggested that they go cash and carry about 1948, how did did you see the profits coming in if you went cash and carry?

AS: That's when, I think, Foodland just opened up, right after the war. Well, I'm close to Katsuro Miho, so when I was in town, he took me to the first supermarket. I think Hiram Fong had something to do with the Foodland Market. Katsuro took me to see the market operation, and that gave me an idea, too. So, I said, "Hey, we got to go." Well, it was in 1948 that we had the highest volume and didn't show profit, so it went into 1949 or 1950 thereabout--don't remember the

exact date but--that I said, "Hey no use sweating like this and don't show a profit. The volume don't show profit. Might as well cut down your overhead and let the people come in." At that time, we still had the bus system, Kahului. Now, we don't have the bus system again. So, people could come out and shop more.

WN: You mean, from the camps?

AS: Yeah, from the camps. But, didn't want to change, so didn't take long before we had to quit.

WN: When you said "high overhead," what would really qualify?

AS: Salesmen, automobiles, lot of office work--billing. You had to have one girl completely on billing. I helped with the billing and things like that. Of course, we had a cash-and-carry department, but it didn't bring in much, so what I did was went on a weekly basis. Those that could pay weekly, we knocked off 5 percent right off the face of the bill. Say the bill is ten dollars, we'll knock off fifty cents right off the bill, then say, "Okay, you owe me \$9.50," like that. Even then, we couldn't induce the majority to go on the weekly basis. I'd say we had maybe about 15-20 percent of our total customers that went on weekly basis. So, things were tough way back.

WN: So, these kompang people, Onishi would carry them for two years?

AS: Right.

WN: In other words, they wouldn't pay . . .

AS: Well, they'd pay a little because they made about thirty bucks a month. So, they paid a little. But because their families were growing and all that, their expenses were more than what they can make every month. So, they were depending on the kompang money. So, they buy, maybe, twenty dollars [worth]. They pay us ten, fifteen dollars possibly, so leave a five-dollar balance. And the five dollar builds up, builds up, and before you know, over a year, they owe over a hundred dollars. Now, supposing the kompang didn't go good for the two years. They can't pay us. You stuck. So, we wait for the next kompang.

I still remember, when there was a kompang dollar that's coming in, we used to send somebody, special, from the office to go and collect that. And he carried a pistol with him, too, you know. I remember. Well, he's going to be carrying lot of money, now. Those days, if you carry \$100 or \$200, that's lot of money in your pocket. I still remember, we had one person that went out to collect those things, and he always carried a pistol.

WN: Was this after the war?

AS: No, this was before the war, I'd say, that I remember.

WN: Is that how people usually paid? By the collector?

AS: It's our collector. From the office, we send somebody who can talk Japanese fluently and get along with the people. You got to use lot of tact. After the war, things got better and better, so it wasn't bad during my time. I was trying to convert them into weekly payment, instead of monthly payment and things like that. And things gradually started getting better. When the union came in [1946], their wages started going up. And then, inflation took over, too. With inflation, salaries had to go up, so everything kept on going up, and up, and up. Even today, inflation is still there with us.

WN: Was it when the union came in that they started getting paid twice a month instead of once a month?

AS: I can't remember why they started getting paid twice a month, but I wouldn't say because of the union. I really can't say how it started that they started paying twice a month.

WN: What were the operating hours of Onishi? First, before you started, and then after you took over? Were there changes?

AS: Before I started, they didn't have a set time, because the owner used to live right back of the store, and as soon as he got up, opened the store. He swept this front and swept the road. [AS examines photograph.] You'll notice here, this is the main street right now. There used to be railroad track that ran right along these coconut trees, and then there was another street right across here, see?

WN: So, the railroad line divided the street?

AS: Yeah. So, I always say I was brought across the tracks, because we were on the other side of the tracks. I can still remember, shee, as soon as I get up, see the old man already, right in the store. And the store didn't close until really dark, because we had to wait for my father to come home to have dinner. My father was a stickler that the whole family must eat at the same time, so we had to wait until the store closes. Then he'd come back and have dinner with us. So, they spent long hours.

Then, after the war [started], because of blackout and all that, we kept strict hours. Seven o'clock [a.m. to] 4:30 [p.m.], we closed. But that didn't stop my work after the war, because I did most of the billing, the bookkeeping, and this is when I did it. Because during the daylight hours, I have to do the buying, taking orders-- I kept myself to one small community, Kahului, which is nearby, so I could walk and take orders, come back, fix the order, and deliver it the same day to give the people service. Usually, the outlying district, if you take today the order, you come back [to the store] next morning, fix the order, and deliver the following day. But in

Kahului, I said I'm going to speed it up. See, when you're young, you get lot of ideas. We used to deliver the next day, but I said no, we going deliver the same day we take the order. Just to speed 'em. I did increase quite a bit of business right in Kahului by doing that, you know.

WN: Was that considered really different?

AS: Oh, yeah. Because most of the salesmen will be going out. They delivered the previous day order. They have to prepare and deliver. But lot of time, if I'm too busy, I'll have somebody else. I used to hire part-timers to deliver my goods--young boys, you know--because I had administrative work. Salesmen [from wholesalers] used to come. I have to give them orders, like that. A lot of our things came from Honolulu through the boat. We had to go down the pier and get all these things from the pier. We did our own hauling. So, I did everything from sweeping the store, to hauling, to take order, deliver, keeping the books--I did everything. (Chuckles)

WN: You said you started about 1939?

AS: Actually, my pay started from 1940. Yeah, part of 1939, I did work, but I was working in place of my dad, so I wasn't being paid. In 1940, January, my dad died, and they paid me my salary. But it wasn't the salary that my dad was getting. So, it was a big drop, but social security really helped my family. Otherwise, I couldn't afford it.

WN: Lot of employees who worked at Onishi, were they predominantly family members of that Onishi family?

AS: No. There was only one family member that worked with Onishi. His name was Satoru Oda. He was cousin to the Onishi family. But he didn't know enough English. Actually, he was supposed to have been the manager of the store, but because of his background--not knowing enough English and all that--they asked me to run the store. My dad had stocks in the store, too. I didn't know that. Mr. Oda, who was a cousin to these people here, didn't own any stock in the corporation. So, I was actually a stockholder of the corporation. I don't know how my dad did it. (Chuckles).

WN: Did the other Japanese stores hire a lot of outsiders, too? You know, not within the family?

AS: Yeah, yeah. But, basically, they tried to get their family, if there was any member. Like Maui Shōkai, basically, was all family, because they were boys. Two brothers ran. The father, the brother-in-law was in there. And they had few Filipinos and one Okinawa-ken. What was his last name? Ganiko?

WN: They had a Nako . . .

AS: Oh, Nako. Not Ganiko. Nako, yeah. Nako man. But they had to

hire outsiders because they didn't have enough within the family.

WN: Were there Filipino salesmen for Onishi?

AS: Yes. We had two Filipino salesmen. Maui Shōkai had, I think, about two salesmen, themselves. And Kobayashi, I don't know whether they had or not. We started hitting few Filipino places, but we quit after a while.

WN: About when was that?

AS: We quit just prior to the war. But we kept one [Filipino] salesman to do the delivering instead of letting him go. We kept him on as delivery man, not as a salesman. Because, basically, we were calling in predominantly Japanese people. We had few Portuguese, though. Portuguese family, they bought from us, but predominantly was Japanese people. So, we cut off all Filipino accounts because they were poor accounts. As a whole, they are thrifty people, you know. Like today, they are good people, thrifty, but back in those days, I guess they didn't make [much] money. They couldn't pay, so finally, we gave up on them. We lost lot of money on them.

WN: Besides not making enough money, you think there are other problems why lot of Filipinos didn't pay?

AS: Oh, I can't see any reasons. Because I had lot of Filipino friends; I knew lot of families. They were good family men. At that time, I can't cite anything--why they were so poor. Because today, I see the families, they are a very close knit family, good payers--you know, in my insurance business today, they are good people.

WN: What did one have to do to become a salesman? Was it like a prestige type job they had?

AS: Yeah, way back, I'd say, before the war, it was more prestige to get out of the plantation community--you know, the camps--and become a salesman. I'd say it was prestigious.

WN: As opposed to, say, being a clerk in the store or something like that?

AS: No, clerk in the store wasn't bad. Was much better than going out in the fields and get dollar a day, because they were paid a little more than the people out in the fields. They wore clean clothes, and they have a roof over their head. So, I'd say it was an honor for any plantation family when members of the family came out and worked for the stores.

WN: Was it hard to get the job?

AS: Oh, yeah. Those days, wasn't that easy. You don't pluck any Tom, Dick, and Harry. And positions were tight. They don't want to leave.

WN: What did they look for when they hired a salesman?

AS: I wasn't in that capacity at that time. It's hard to say what they look for, though. But I would say, ken had lots to do if you have to replace a salesman that's died or retired. He has to go that same district. We look, you know. As I say, if Fukushima-ken had plenty, if I was in their boots, I'd pick up Fukushima-ken [order taker]. Same ken folks to go into that district. You send somebody other than that, he'd have a hard time. Because when I took over, I know I had a salesman calling on that district, and he did a bum job. Just couldn't sell, because he was Hiroshima-ken. So, finally, when my kid brother started working, I sent my kid brother up there. Whereas my family is known up there, so was easier for him. So, he built it right back up. That's why I said, people are funny. They buy because of you, not because of Onishi Store. Some of them, yeah. We have some loyal ones. "Mr. Onishi helped me out." You know, they stuck by you--really stuck by you.

WN: Would you say that the average customer bought from one of the big five stores [i.e., the five Kahului Japanese stores] or they tried to buy evenly from each one?

AS: Basically they have one big store that they buy. Some of them bought exclusively from us, but the vast majority bought some from us, some from Maui Shōkai, or they might buy from three different stores, like that. All depend how big their family is. Those days, things were cheap, and they didn't need too many things. So, they'd carry two or three stores at the most, though. So, we have our own clients. That's why I said we never fought among the salesmen. So, certain areas, we'd cover them twice a week; certain areas, only once a week.

WN: Before you took over, what percent, do you think, of the customers were take-order-and-delivery customers as opposed to drop-in customers?

AS: I'd say, 95 percent. Good 95 percent [of the customers were served by order taking and delivery].

WN: How about after you took over?

AS: After I took over, still, people never came out much to do shopping. I don't blame them. Because we went out to get the business. Why should they come in the store? Only time they came in the store was during the Christmas holidays. We would spruce up the store, and they'd come in to buy. That's when we opened evenings like that, and they'd come in. But everything, the majority of the people, even that comes in, would charge. That's why I said the overhead cost was too high.

WN: What percent of all your customers charged?

AS: Charged? Well, if you not counting [those who paid] weekly, I'd

say just about all. We had few that came. The few that came wasn't regular patrons. They just stop by, buy few things, and out they go. Because we had the cash and carry store.

WN: How about kids who wanted to buy soda or something like that?

AS: Oh, they came in. They stopped by. But as I said, we were across the tracks, so not too many people came across the railroad track to do shopping. You see, we had lot of stores. [AS examines photograph.] You see this railroad track? That's the track here. And the main street is this here. And the main camp is right back of here, and Ooka was right here. You know, people not going to come all the way out here to do shopping. They either went to Ooka Market--right here used to be Ige [Store].

WN: When you say "camp," you mean the Kahului Railroad Camp?

AS: Kahului Railroad Camp was all back here, see? Behind where the shopping center is here.

WN: Behind where the Kahului Shopping Center is now?

AS: Yeah, yeah.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

AS: In that vicinity, there was a big camp--right in the Kahului Shopping Center--was a big camp there. Back here was empty lots. Right back of all this, was empty.

WN: The ocean side?

AS: Yeah. If you go straight from here--right here, now, is the Burger King--you go straight, it's Chart House, right here. That used to be the manager's home. We didn't have too many people living on our side. Was mostly hakujin [Caucasian]. The haoles used to live on our side of the street, back here. Along the ocean side was all hakujin. No Japanese family.

WN: Did the haoles come to the store and charge, too?

AS: Never. They always bought from the plantation stores. They never patronized us.

WN: Before the merger of MA [Maui Agricultural] Company and HC&S [Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar], they had different branches of plantation stores, right? But, in those times when you folks were operating, you didn't make any distinctions? You folks gave credit to everybody?

AS: We gave credit to whoever we knew. We didn't have regular credit application, or anything. But if they needed credit, we'd give them credit. It wasn't a discriminatory thing. We gave credit to anyone who wanted to buy from us. We been doing that for years, and you can't say, "Hey, I can't give you credit." That's one thing. During those days, we never discriminated.

WN: Even someone who just came in off the boat and started working? You would give him credit?

AS: Yeah. We'd give him credit. I'd say the old-timers were real humanitarians, though. They saved lot of families by extending credit. I don't know if I mentioned this, but when I first took over, during the war years, I looked at the books and the amount of outstanding accounts we had, and I went through the accounts receivable. In the first year, I threw out something like thirty somewhat thousand dollars. I said, "You don't need this in the book. You know you not going to collect." They never sent to collector. We made few bucks during the war, so I said, "Hell, let's knock this thing out. Bad credit. So, we don't have to pay tax." I know I threw away thirty somewhat thousand dollars from the books alone, in my first year when I started keeping the books. So, you can see the amount of credit that we were carrying.

WN: If the salesmen from Onishi goes out to the camps, what kind of things did Onishi Shōkai offer as opposed to what the plantation store would offer?

AS: Plantation store had more things as far as hardware and dry goods were concerned. And they had their meat department, which we didn't have. We were more geared for the Japanese people. Rice, shōyu, Ajinomoto, things like that. We also had feed, like chicken feed. That was one big item that we always carried. We had chicken feed, because most of the plantation homes raised their own chickens. That was another big item that we always carried.

There wasn't any difference, but the plantation store didn't send out many salesmen out to the camps. Not like us. Everything was done through our sales force. Because the plantation stores was right within the camp, so people went to the stores to buy things. And then, they'd deliver for them. They had delivery service. Like in Pulehu Camp, there was one man. He was an Okinawa-ken man, good family friend of ours. He ran the [plantation] store. He had a delivery man. They'd come, and order things, they take it all down. Then, that afternoon, they'd go and deliver that. This is how they conducted their business. They had few salesmen that went out, but very few. So, we had our competition with them, but I guess people bought because of maybe the name Onishi, some because of the salesman that called on them. Could have been family friend, relative, you know.

WN: When you took over, did you continue this same process all the way up . . .

AS: Same process. Yeah, you can't change it. (Laughs)

WN: How about after the people started to move into Kahului and they started to close the camps?

AS: By then, we were out of business already. Because we went out of business about 1958, 1959, thereabout. I went to insurance about 1958. After, I said I had enough. After one year in insurance, we closed the business. So, I think Japanese Mercantile closed before us. Kobayashi, I forgot when Kobayashi closed. Only Maui Shōkai kept up. When they closed the old Kahului Town, they relocated Maui Shōkai to the Camp 5 Store. About two, three miles up, into the camp store. That's where they operated. So, by then, we were out of business already. So, they [Maui Shōkai] were the last of the old guard that kept up that type of business.

WN: If 95 percent or maybe 100 percent of your business was credit, how were the wholesalers paid?

AS: Credit, same thing. That's why you need a real good cash flow. But once you have it set out that you are giving thirty, sixty day credit, the money already revolving, see? So, at that time, say, if you were doing \$15,000 a month business, you expect \$15,000 to be coming in. So, you can pay your wholesalers; you can pay your expenses. Already it was a revolving thing, like that. The only way the store's going to make out is try to build your volume with the same amount of salesmen. But with the same amount of salesmen, your volume drop, you going to lose money.

WN: Is that what was happening?

AS: Yeah. This is what's happening when gradually the cash-and-carry stores and the supermarkets started coming up. No way you can compete with them. They can do volume buying and we couldn't. I was buying lot of things directly from the Mainland, but still then, overhead is too high. In fact, during the wartime, I was the only retail merchant that was able to bring chicken feed directly from the Mainland. I was the only one on Maui.

WN: How did you manage that?

AS: Well, one of the salesmen, I got to know him well. He really fixed me up. It was the Sperry Company. We were bringing in 1,000 bags a month, directly from the Mainland. But still then, you controlled by the OPA. So, couldn't do anything. You'd make a few bucks, but So, it's hard to beat today's type of operation where you don't have to make no billing--money is right there for you. And everybody else is taking a higher markup. They have few loss leaders, but the markup is great. Talking to like Ah Fook's Supermarket. They used to operate right across us. Have you talked to Jimmy Mizuguchi?

WN: No, I talked to Raymond Hew, though.

AS: Ah, he's too young. He doesn't know anything. But the guy to talk to is Jimmy Mizuguchi. He was right across us. Ah Fook Market, they went into supermarket operation. When the new town was developed in this area here . . .

WN: You mean, the first increment [of Dream City]?

AS: Yeah, the first increment. That's when they allowed Ah Fook, Toda Drug, and Ben Franklin Store. That was the first three stores that got in here.

WN: In the new Kahului Shopping Center?

AS: In the new shopping center. At that time, they told us they going to have only three of each stores. And how could they take care of JM [Japanese Mercantile] Company, Onishi, Maui Shōkai, Kobayashi, Noda Market, Ige, Kahului--that's the Ooka Market. And we had lot of small stores, too. Uehara Store. There was Ah Fook across us. Had Murata Store. There were a lot of small stores, too. All in here. So, when they said "three," we could see the handwriting that they don't need us there. They made it real tough for us, though. You at the mercy of these people.

WN: A&B [Alexander & Baldwin]?

AS: Oh, yeah. They don't like you, you don't get the lease. So, Maui Shōkai, they were the last of the ones that really held out, and they couldn't get a place right in Kahului. Noda Market, they got a place later, but they paying a much higher lease rental than Ah Fook. I think, when they first started, Ah Fook was paying only about 1-1/2 percent of the gross. I think when Noda Market had to go in, they paid anywhere from 4 to 5 percent.

WN: And Ah Fook's percentage didn't go up?

AS: I think in the renegotiating, I'm pretty sure went up, though, when they had to set up the new lease. Because the 1-1/2 percent was ridiculously low for that time.

WN: You think there was any kind of temptation to move Onishi Store closer to the plantations?

AS: I don't think there's any way you could do that. That is, you don't own the land. Even operating from here, they tell us whether we can sell liquor or we cannot sell liquor.

WN: You mean, Kahului Railroad?

AS: Kahului, yeah. Kahului Railroad directed that. I couldn't sell hard liquor. There were only two places in Kahului that sold hard

liquor--Hollister Drug and Toda Drug. They were the two drugstores we had before. The Hollister Drug became Craft Drug.

WN: Oh, that's still at the Kaahumanu [Shopping Center].

AS: See? Yeah, that's right. They were the only two stores that sold hard liquor.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

WN: So, were there stores in Kahului that actually inquired or tried to . . .

AS: Get in the plantation? I don't think so. I don't know about others, but Because if you go into the plantation camps, you're hemmed in there. That's it. And you in direct competition with the plantation stores, so I don't think they would tolerate that. The plantation store was by itself. Every camp had 'em. Not every camp, but Camp 1 had a store there. Paia had a store--that was a big store. Keahua had. Pulehu had. I know Kikania used to have. I don't know whether Old Kailua had or not. But that's about all the outlying district that had camp stores. Oh, H. Poko had. Hamakua Poko. That's all I can think of that had plantation stores. So, I don't think they would have let any outsider get into a place like that where they own all the land. I doubt it.

WN: So, what was in it for the Kahului Railroad to allow all these stores to come in?

AS: Well, that's a seaport. I think they needed a town to be built. And was a nice town, I'd say, when we were young. Everybody was very close. We knew everybody. But as time went on and things started changing, and when the new Kahului Town was going to be rebuilt--they called it Dream City, and new business area was going to be built--that's when the merchants started fighting. Because they knew only three of a kind. So, that's when Ooka moved to Wailuku. In fact, Ben Franklin, Toda Drug, and Ah Fook Supermarket, they were dissatisfied with what Kahului Railroad was doing. Bought some land right where--you know where my office is?

WN: In Wailuku?

AS: Right across there, they had three lots right there. All adjoining to each other. They were going to open right there--their place of business. That's why, I said, these three were lucky because when they ran away from Kahului--they said they were going up Wailuku to open their business--Kahului Railroad got them back. That's why, I say, Ah Fook had a cheap lease rental. So did Ben Franklin, as well as Toda Drug.

WN: Wasn't there going to be another small shopping center near KMVI radio station? Do you know anything about that?

AS: There was a small place that they had--in fact, it's still vacant, now--that Maui Shōkai was going to open. Just like a camp store. But he got shot down. Lot of politics came into play. The merchants in Kahului went against it because they felt if they have one store right within all the homes, their volume might be jeopardized. So, they fought against that, and he couldn't get in. You ask Mr. Shimoda [Masakazu Shimoda, another interviewee], he'll tell you.

WN: Yeah, he told me about that.

AS: He was bitter. Because some of the very ones that wasn't satisfied with what Kahului Railroad did--was going to come up Wailuku--these are the people that fought him from opening the place there. So, if you ask him, boy, he was real bitter. I know Mr. Shimoda real well. Even today, we're good friends. He'll tell you the story. (Laughs)

WN: The big five [i.e., the five Kahului Japanese stores], what were some of the differences with each store? I know, basically, you folks sold the same kind of things, but . . .

AS: Yeah, we sold same kind of things, except in Maui Shōkai. I think they catered more to the Filipino trade, so they carried lot of Filipino goods in comparison to us. We hardly carried Filipino goods. As I said, we went out of the Filipino market. So, basically, was more for the Japanese trade. So was Japanese Mercantile, Ikeda Store, Kobayashi Store. They were more catered to the Japanese trade.

WN: Was there any kind of collaboration between the five to . . .

AS: Collaboration, I would say, yes. When they got together, five of the stores--Onishi, Japanese Mercantile, Maui Shōkai, Kobayashi I don't think Ikeda was in this. I may be wrong. Ikeda could have been in this. And Kodama. Kodama--which is today the Standard Furniture and Supply Store. We had a service station--gasoline station--that these five [stores] bought into, built. So, we had all our automobiles serviced there. Mr. Kodama used to be the manager and ran that service station for us. He got paid. He was one of the shareholders. And then, with that, they opened the Standard Furniture on the side. We were selling furniture, too, so we were in direct competition. Somehow, things didn't look right, so I told my boss, "Hey, let's get out of here. Let the management do whatever they please." So, I was the maverick that got out first. I think I was about the first one that got out of that five group that had the service station. We cut off and we did business elsewhere. We did business with Kahului Garage. (Chuckles)

WN: Did they do that to keep the gas cost down?

AS: Yeah, because, naturally, the gas cost going be down in comparison. [AS examines photograph.] I thought I saw Kahului Garage Yeah, here.

WN: That was on Puunene Avenue?

AS: Yeah. And then, the Standard Garage was right here. We used to call it Standard Garage. Just beyond here. Right here used to be Kutsunai Photo Studio, and then, right here. So, it'd be something like this. This is a blank here. This is Kobayashi Store. Then, there was a street running here. Then, was the Standard Garage. That was right here.

WN: So, as far as bookkeeping when you're working on this kind of credit, what were some of the problems that were caused by it as opposed to bookkeeping today?

AS: Well, today everything is done through computer, machines, and things like that. At that time, everything was manual. Everything was manual, so you may come up with errors, which you don't know. But I thought we were pretty strict. You know, we add all the bills, then we total it up for the month by districts. Then, we knew exactly how much each district volume is. If the volume is down, we'd call in the salesman, say, "Hey, what's happening? The volume is little down this month." Things like that. But like today, everything is through computer. Of course, it wasn't this type of operation, but with computer, they know, each department, what the department is doing. But those days, we never had such a thing. So, it all depend on each individual salesman. Say, if you sold \$1,500 one month, and next month, his volume drop to about \$1,200, you say, "Hey, there's a \$300 difference here. What happened?" So, he may have some suggestion. Oh, our price is high, and things like that.

WN: Was there pressure on the salesman?

AS: Sure. The pressure, I would say, is the sales itself, there. Because I kept a pretty close tab on sales when I got into that operation. So, every month, I'd check into it. If they sold \$1,500 and they didn't collect \$1,500 from the previous sales, I say, "Hey, what happened? People not paying?" You know, I check. For each customer, I have a ledger, and I look at if they paid in full, or still have a big balance, and things like that. But I can proudly say we've never sent one account to a collector. I did threaten one [account], but we never sent a account to a collector. So, in a way, we're damn fools, (laughs) trusting people, but that's what life is all about. Some are good, some are bad.

WN: You know, when you talk about trusting people, was that out of necessity, or do you think that was out of custom, or . . .

AS: Kindness. Kindness. That's why I say, I have lot of respect for this Onishi old man, the one who started this business. He was a real kind man. Everybody liked him. And that kept on.

WN: The store during the war--was Onishi affected by the Alien Properties

Custody Act?

AS: No, we weren't. You see, like Kobayashi Store, Japanese Merchantile, they were hit hard by the APC, Alien Property Custodian. There's a guy still living in Honolulu by the name of Karimoto. He came here as an Alien Property Custodian agent. I remember him because he was with one of the banks in Honolulu. He was real nice man. Karimoto. I know they had to close up Kobayashi Store for a while because the United States took all the assets. We had to bid for their goods. Because supplies were short. I know I won out on the bid. Boy, they didn't think much of me at that time, but they don't realize. I got to know that APC man, and he told me, "Hey, go bid on it."

I said, "No, I don't want to bid because I going to be hurting them, maybe." I had an old idea, because government.

He said, "Look, the merchandise is there. You know all their cost. So, you go figure out their cost and go bid below the cost, see? And then, you can make some money."

Finally, I said, ah, reluctantly. Oh, I stayed up couple nights working on the figures. They gave me an inventory, so I worked. And then, come to find out, I won on the bid. I was the highest bidder. I chopped down quite a bit, but I was the highest bidder. So, now, I have to go get the goods from Kobayashi Store. Boy, it was an eerie feeling, trying to pick up their merchandise. They are hurt already, and then I go in there with a truck, loading on my truck, and take it back to our store. It wasn't too nice, but, well, that's business. If I didn't do it, somebody else was going to get it.

WN: Why was Kobayashi affected?

AS: All the stockholders were aliens. Our stockholders, not one was alien.

WN: What if, say, one was non-alien of Kobayashi?

AS: Shee, I don't know. They could have taken the one alien stock, but I don't think they could have taken all.

WN: Oh, if there were three alien and three non-alien, they would only take away the three alien . . .

AS: Possibly. I don't know how they determined that. But I know our corporation was all [U.S.] citizens. Like the stock was in my name already. My boss was born and raised here. He was a citizen. His brother was a citizen. He had two brothers here at that time. That was the three stock--oh, we had two salesmen. In fact, Mr. Kochi had stock in the store. But he was paid off during the war years. He and another guy by the name of Nomura. He was another

stockholder. That was the only stockholder we had. Other than the two Onishi boys, two salesmen, and myself. Oh, yeah. Kochi man was an alien. So, I think, as long the majority stock was American, U.S. citizen, they didn't touch. But if the majority stock was with the alien control, I think they grab. Because they didn't grab Mr. Kochi's stocks. Otherwise, I would know it.

WN: Kobayashi actually lost everything, then?

AS: Everything, yeah. They came right back, though. They bought out some things, but the government took most of their assets away. They can't take the building because that belongs to Kahului Railroad. Although Kobayashi put it up, but that's a leasehold land. If you lose the lease, it goes right back to Kahului Railroad.

WN: There weren't any sons or anything of Kobayashi that . . .

AS: Kobayashi's son, that's the one running the potato chips. The son that's running the potato chip is third generation, now. Oh, I'd say, second generation because the old man was born and raised in Japan. But there was an elderly man, Kobayashi, that actually started that. Then, the son took over. And then, now, his sons are running the potato chips there. They came back, but they came back real small already. All within the family, and they had few salesmen--old salesmen--that they maintained. So, they were really hit hard. So did Japanese Mercantile, where Shuji Watanabe came. He was a salesman with them, then. But the Kinoshitas [owners of Japanese Mercantile Company], they were in Japan, I think, already, so Shuji Watanabe took over.

WN: They were under the Alien Properties, too?

AS: Yeah, Alien Property. I don't know. We didn't bid for their goods, though. All I remember was Kobayashi one. And it was a sad situation for me, because they didn't think well of me at that time. Although we are good friends today, but at that time with all the hysteria going on. And, "Why you want to do this to us?" But if I didn't take it away, somebody else was going to take it, and for a cheaper price, yet. They'd be hurt more.

WN: So, the Alien Properties took over Kobayashi's stock, and then you bought it from the government, then?

AS: Yeah, yeah.

WN: So, Kobayashi didn't get any of what you paid?

AS: Yeah. I don't know whether Kobayashi was able to get back something. I really don't know. So did Japanese Mercantile. I really don't know what happened, but you might ask Mike Kinoshita. He works for the Star Ice and Soda Works. Maybe he would know something, because that was his family. He's a University of Hawaii graduate.

WN: Onishi, you said, closed down in . . .

AS: About 1959.

WN: You said it was because you couldn't maintain that type of operation.

AS: No way. (Chuckles)

WN: The overhead was too high?

AS: Oh, yeah. Wasn't paying, you know.

WN: Okay, I think that's it. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

**STORES and
STOREKEEPERS of
Paia & Puunene, Maui**

Volume I

ETHNIC STUDIES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**Ethnic Studies Program
University of Hawaii, Manoa**

June 1980